

GROUND COVER

News and Solutions from the Ground Up

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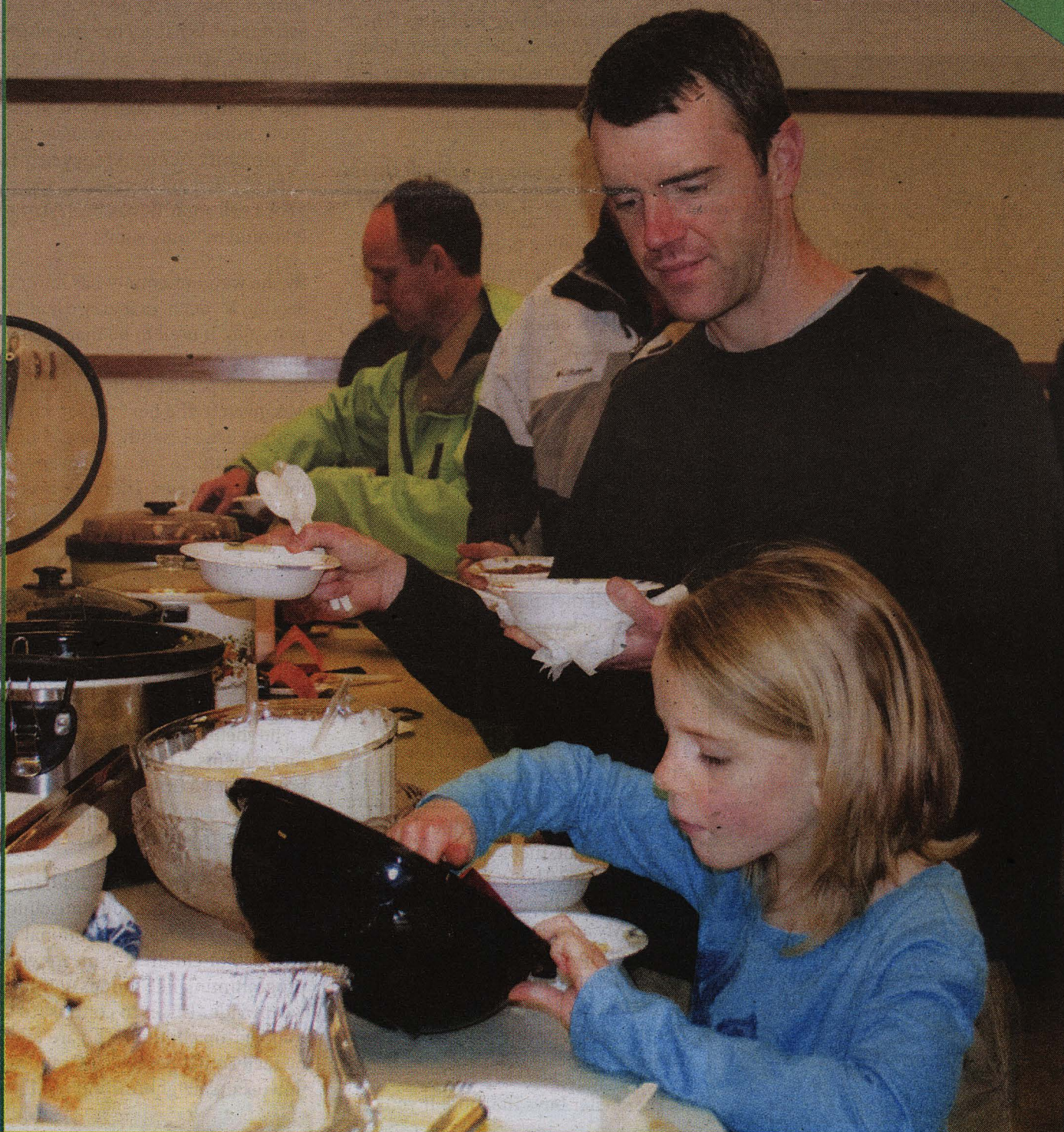
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Doubled-up children: Should they be considered homeless?

We were privileged to encounter an excellent exposition of the difficulties faced by children whose families are temporarily living with other families that makes a case for those children receiving services reserved for the homeless. It is such a good introduction to our inquiry on how homelessness affects young children, that we are running it this month in lieu of my column. – Susan Beckett

by Beth McCullough (Homeless Education Liaison for Adrian Public Schools and also the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Grant Coordinator for Lenawee County)

"Why should doubled-up students count as homeless?" It was a question debated in a subcommittee considering expanding the definition of homeless to include temporarily doubled-up homeless individuals in the Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2011. The new definition of homelessness would allow doubled-up families and students to receive housing assistance, like first month's rent and security deposit,

previously provided only to families living in shelters or totally unsheltered.

Those opposing the bill argued that doubled-up children were not as vulnerable as our most at-risk children in shelters. I was asked to chime in. Here is my chime...or maybe it sounds more like an alarm clock.

In my county in a 2010 year-end report from our largest family shelter, there was an 82 percent increase in temporary shelter nights for adults. There was a 92 percent increase in temporary shelter nights for children. There was a 100 percent increase in denials. Shelters are full. They remain full and are turning people away.

Where do people go when shelters are full? Families double up with other families, often putting their host family at risk of being evicted if the landlord finds out there is a second family living there.

The increase in homelessness in rural areas, which we can document, is almost all doubled-up homeless. There don't tend to be shelters in corn fields, but there are foreclosures of farms and devastated small towns when even a small business or factory closes.

It is a terrible game of musical chairs.

When the definition of homeless and the benefits a family can receive to assist them out of homelessness, is dependent on being in a shelter, then it is a terrible game of musical chairs. Shelter beds become the chairs and if you sit down quickly enough, you get a bed. You can now be considered homeless and receive assistance. If you didn't sit down fast enough (or call the shelter at the moment a bed became available), then you don't get a chair or a bed or assistance.

In a moment of frustration I once said to a Department of Human Services worker, "If they put up a tent in the shelter's back yard, does that count? The shelter is full. They are beyond full. They have people sleeping on couches with their toddlers and infants sleeping in play pens next to the couches."

Then I was asked about vulnerability. Aren't doubled-up children taken care of by the family they are doubled-up with? After all, there was someone who took them in? Those children are not as vulnerable as the children in shelters...right? My answer was that sometimes doubled-up children are more at-risk. Why? Because there are certain services offered at shelters that are not available for doubled-up children. Here are a few examples:

* The shelter buys the food. If your

food assistance case has been closed or is being opened, DHS has 45 days to make a decision. That means no food for 45 days. We have four food pantries. You can go to each every 30 days. Food pantries give food for six meals. That means you can find eight days' worth of food if you are willing to walk the miles between the pantries spread all over the county. You cannot go to those food pantries again for 30 days.

* The shelter has bus tickets. Our public bus system takes \$2 for each person for each ride. A Mom with two small children in tow would need to spend \$6 to go to the grocery store or to DHS or to look at an apartment. If you plan to go to three places with three children and get back, that would be \$24. Each person is only allowed two bags on the bus, so frequent trips are needed. Homeless families don't have \$24 to spend on public transportation.

* The shelter provides a caseworker to assist with a housing plan. The knowledge of a caseworker at a shelter is invaluable. "How do you get housing assistance? What agency has utility funding? Who do I go to first, the landlord, DHS, Housing First (which is fully spent in our county) or to the non-profit housing assistance agency? Does Community Action Agency help? With what? I filled out Section 8 papers? Will I get a call soon? It has been six months. It should be soon, right?"

By the way, our county has fewer Section 8 vouchers than we had 10 years ago. It used to be that when someone on Section 8 moved out of the county or passed away, that voucher was given to the next person on the waiting list. Presently, those vouchers just go away. So we have fewer vouchers than 10 years ago. There are over 1,000 people waiting on our Section 8 wait list. The family who filled out Section 8 papers six months ago will probably never get called.

* The shelter provides a legal advocate. This is particularly important for women escaping domestic violence.

* The shelter provides support groups for residents. They also provide support groups for victims of domestic violence and non-residents can come to that...if they have transportation.

* The shelter provides a children's program. There is a full time child's advocate. This means emotional support for children. It means children's programming like groups and the tutor we provide. This is in contrast to the doubled-up children who are told to be really quiet because if Grandma's downstairs neighbors find out there are

children here, you have to move and it will get Grandma in trouble.

The child advocate also knows what to do when the child is drawing pictures depicting physical or sexual abuse. A relative the child is living with might just tell the child that nice children don't draw such things.

* The shelter provides a large clothes pantry. This is huge in our largest shelter. Doubled-up families can go to the local agency that gives away clothes. You might need to use the public transportation system to get there and you can only take two bags and you need a birth certificate for each of your children.

Being in the shelter means the family/children can immediately get into counseling. Our largest shelter is run by an outpatient counseling agency so all residents are given the choice to start actual therapy if needed. This therapy can continue long after the family has moved out of the shelter and is permanently housed.

* The shelter can give a letter of residency. This is particularly important if you are applying for state assistance. The letter stating that the family is currently residing at the shelter cuts through so much red tape. A letter from your sister doesn't seem to have the same power – if your sister can put it in writing that you and your kids are living with her without getting in trouble.

* The shelter requires children to be in school unless there is a safety risk. When a mother talks about just wanting her children to have a week off just to adjust, a shelter caseworker would explain that getting the children back to their school is often the most comforting thing we can do. It gives the child six hours to feel normal again. For six hours the child is not in a shelter. A well-meaning relative doesn't know the research. She wants her sister's kids to be in school but maybe a week off would be ok...right?

Shelters are mandated to make reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. If a child in a family comes to the shelter with bruises, it will be documented and reported. If children come back from a weekend visit with the non-custodial parent and there are bruises, it will be reported. We know homeless children see and experience a higher rate of violence than housed children. The aunt may or may not report the bruises or maybe Mom went to her sister because she knew her sister would let them keep the bruised child out of school until the

see HOMELESS, page 9

GROUNDCOVER NEWS MISSION:

Groundcover News exists to create opportunity and a voice for low-income people while taking action to end homelessness and poverty.

Susan Beckett, Publisher
contact@groundcovernews.com

Laurie Lounsbury, Editor
editor@groundcovernews.com

C. Lee Alexander, Assistant Editor
Andrew Nixon, Assistant Editor

Contributors
Martha Brunell
Leonore Gerstein
LaShawn Courtwright
Sarah Arshad
Rissa Haynes
David KE Dodge
Beth McCullough
William Lopez
Robert Salo
Shawn Story

Letters to the Editor:
editor@groundcovernews.com

Story or Photo Submissions:
submissions@groundcovernews.com
Advertising
contact@groundcovernews.com

www.groundcovernews.com
423 S. 4th Ave, Ann Arbor
734-972-0926

So Much More Than a Rock



by Rev. Dr. Martha Brunell, Pastor, Bethlehem United Church of Christ

In New York State, everything north of the five boroughs of New York City is known as upstate. I did much of my growing up in a portion of upstate that is also known as Central New York. On the long east-west axis of the state, from Albany to Buffalo, Central New York includes eight counties that are right smack in the middle of the Empire State. This is a land riddled with a history of transition, of people on the move. Early in the nineteenth century, the Erie Canal provided reliable transportation for easterners to flow away from their roots and into new opportunities further west. This region was crisscrossed with routes on the Underground Railroad, too. In fact, the great Underground Railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman lived the

last fifty years of her life, after the Civil War, in Auburn, NY where I lived from age two to age eighteen. The area was covered with farms and orchards during my childhood, some of them relying on a migrant labor force. Over and over, the land has been familiar to different people between homes.

One summer when I was in high school, I was a member of a group of Senior Girl Scouts that organized and ran a day camp for migrant children while the adults in their families were out in one field or another picking the current crop. The day started with a long bumpy ride in an old yellow school bus. We made our way from one migrant camp to the next picking up waiting children. It was a bit chaotic. We never knew ahead of time which children would be coming on a particular day. All of us running the program had years of camping experience. There was no end to our energetic ideas about what

each day would hold. I don't remember much of what we planned. What I do remember is what the kids loved to do most. Every day they picked up rocks, ordinary rocks, stuffed them in their pockets, and carried them back to their temporary homes in the shabby migrant camps. Once we figured out their attraction to the rocks, we came up with new rock possibilities. If I recall, they were largely uninterested in rock crafts. They wanted to wrap their hands around those rocks and tote them home. Forty-five years have passed since that summer. Over that long time, a picture of one child or another, rock in hand, remains with me.

I have come to see their rocks as something solid, something that won't disappear or radically change the next day. Those remembered rocks cause me to wonder what kind of stability kids crave when they have inadequate housing or no housing at all. More

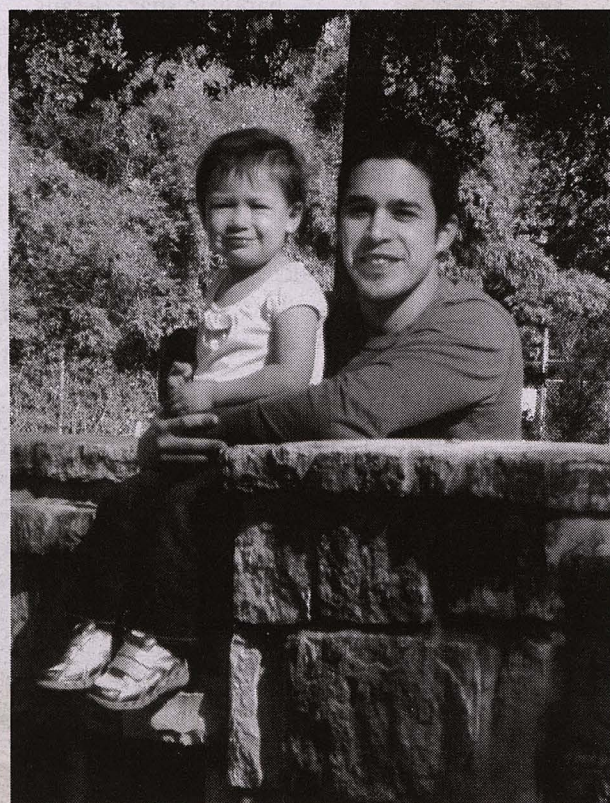
recently I have known other kids in crisis housing situations at domestic violence shelters, and throughout the poor urban neighborhood in Saint Louis where I served as a pastor for seventeen years. I was aware that summer in the late 1960s and I am aware now that all those children need much more than a palm-sized rock to ensure their safety and security. Their challenge, which is our challenge, seems daunting on a good day. The questions are simple; their answers are more complicated. Where do we begin, what steps do we take, to offer them substance other than a rock? And how do we include them in the conversation and discussion about what that substance might be? Children in the migrant camps, children in the shelters, children throughout one stressed urban neighborhood, still are waiting for you and me to live more creatively, more willingly, more persistently into such housing questions. Are we ready?

Explaining homelessness to your kids — and yourself

by William Lopez
Groundcover Contributor

My two-and-a-half-year-old daughter seems to get smarter by the day. Every morning, she greets me with a smile and about a half-dozen new words of increasing complexity. Perhaps it's because there are so many adults in her life that she is able to hold long conversations about things I once thought far too complicated for a two-year-old. While this new stage is certainly fun, it brings with it its own set of unique challenges. Whereas the primary challenge with a six-month-old is figuring out if the incessant crying means "I'm hungry," "I'm thirsty," "my diaper's dirty," or all three, the challenge with a toddler is figuring out how to explain the intricate and complex workings of the world both in a manner that she will understand and in a way that does these complex issues justice. This process is also enlightening, however, as creating the "elevator speech" of one's own beliefs can make one reassess those beliefs, their strengths and weaknesses, and what's really at the heart of the issue.

About a month ago, my brother and I went to get some coffee, and I took my daughter with us. On the way home, we ended up at the playground in the very early morning. On the park bench was a man curled up in the fetal position, a bag of cans lying next to him. When she asked me,



William Lopez and his young daughter

"Daddy, why is he sleeping there?" I hardly knew where to begin.

In our capitalist, individualistic society, we often frame issues of homelessness, illness, unemployment, use of government assistance, and the like as issues of personal failure that reflect weaknesses in moral character. The "Occupy Wall Street" movement illustrated this mindset brilliantly, with a large group of protesters pushing for a redistribution

of wealth, and a competing group arguing that those who work hard will earn wealth for themselves. Sure, hard work, positive choices, and personal agency can all turn a life around for the better. Rare is the recovered drug addict that does not cite incredible force of will as a driving factor that allows him or her to pursue a better life. But to say that homelessness results solely from choice and moral weakness is to gloss over a simple, fundamental truth: it doesn't. Homelessness is the result of a confluence of social and economic factors, often completely unpredictable and rarely controllable, that can push those with an over-extended social and financial safety net into the

abyss.

Safety nets and housing insecure families in the U.S. are examined in the National Center on Family Homelessness report, America's Youngest Outcasts 2010. It documents the risk factors for homeless children in every state and details the policy and planning activities of the state to address the issue. The study shows a spike in child homelessness following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. It also reports

that, between 2007 and 2010, the crash of the stock market and the foreclosure crises resulted in a 38 percent increase in child homelessness. The effects of Katrina and Rita, along with the earthquake in Haiti and tsunami in Japan, illustrate the unpredictability of certain causes of homelessness. But the financial crisis (along with a deeper look at who becomes homeless following a natural disaster) shows that those that lose their homes are not a random selection of the population. No: it's those whose resources are already stretched thin, those without health insurance, those unable to find employment, who find themselves without a roof over their heads.

As my daughter sat there, waiting for me to answer the loaded question of why exactly this man was sleeping outside, I began to think through how the issue needed to be framed, not only when talking to her, but when talking to anyone. Because I could not fully relay the complicated and intricate causes of homelessness, I was tempted to reduce it to the individual, and say something like, "Well, he has nowhere else to sleep." While this is true, it is indeed selling the story short. Further, this tendency to reduce social complexity into individual narrative for the sake of simplicity is partially to blame for never thinking beyond the "pick yourself up by the bootstraps" mental-

see EXPLAINING, page 9

The Vulnerabilities of Homeless Children

by Leonore Gerstein
Groundcover Contributor

Some people say that a society is judged by the way it treats its most fragile members. It sounds like a noble standard, doesn't it? But how does that fit in with another belief we hold in the United States, namely that each individual is responsible primarily for him or herself? Does that sound more like reality to you? And even if you apply that principle to adults, what principle guides our treatment of children, homeless children in particular?

Among the many individuals who experience homelessness, none are more vulnerable than the infants, children and adolescents whose well-being depends entirely on their parents, and, by extension, on the whole village we call society. Homeless children are marked by the catastrophic events their caregivers experience in ways that can have long lasting effects. Every stage of growth can be disrupted by the trauma of homelessness.

The loss of home can impair a child's ability to develop the strengths associated with each developmental stage. Infants and toddlers are working on developing trust, self-esteem and autonomy. School age kids build on these strengths and become intellectually and socially competent. They learn to cope with feelings and to self-regulate. The loss of a physical home often means the loss of the intangible nest everyone needs. Our society is struggling to find ways to recreate that nest through multiple interventions for parents and kids, even as we try to eradicate homelessness in the first place.

Local efforts for homeless children and their families are extensive. More than twenty agencies coordinate interventions through the Housing Alliance of Washtenaw County. Clients are assisted with temporary housing, support and outreach designed to meet each family's specific needs, and being there in every sense for children and youth. These non-profit organizations place clients in either a shelter or temporary dwelling (eligibility up to two years), as long as space and funds are available. Parents and children are screened for signs of trauma and interventions are coordinated with the appropriate agencies.

In conjunction with Head Start, SOS runs Time for Tots, a preschool serving children from birth to age five, thus extending the Head Start model to meet the needs of unhoused children and their parents. SOS director Faye Askew-King pinpoints language delay as the chief area of concern for the chil-

dren in this program. TOTS director Janesse Whitlock and Parent Coordinator Caroline Kennedy confirm this but add that within a few weeks in the program, the staff sees improvement in toddlers' self-expression (often with sign language at first). Teachers, interns and volunteers create individual educational plans tailored to each child's needs in all areas of development. The program is animated by a deep concern for a child's sense of security and the capacity to bond with caring adults, to create a

tine. At Alpha House, we work hard to help kids be kids – without the stress of wondering where they will sleep and if they will eat that night."

Galimberti related one Alpha House success story:

"A mom came to Alpha House with two daughters, ages seven and two. The seven-year-old ("Maria") was extremely outgoing and wise beyond her years. She had the most beautiful brown eyes, and wore her hair in braids with bright-

ly colored beads. Mom shared that Maria had not been in school for some time, as they had been moving around so much and had no way to get her there. Most recently they stayed with a former boyfriend but had to leave due to violence in the home.

"While the two-year-old was very quiet and very attached to Mom, Maria quickly engaged with staff here. She was extremely open and happy to share details about her day – both

struggles and successes. Maria asked every day if it was "Kids Group Day" (a therapeutic group focusing on feelings and friendship skills). On non-group days, she asked if she could play in the Children's Services Coordinator's office. She was a prolific artist, drawing bright, cheerful pictures for staff and other guests. It became clear that Maria felt left out

with her younger sister getting most of Mom's non-work time. Staff here worked with Mom on carving out special time for Maria every day – even a few minutes at a time – without her sister present. The Children's Services Coordinator helped Mom learn to listen and attend to Maria, even when Mom felt overwhelmed with work and multiple life responsibilities. Mom and Maria began to really enjoy their time together, and it helped the two-year-old start to play independently, too. Staff helped Mom enroll Maria in school and arranged for transportation and school supplies through the Education Project for Homeless Youth."

The public school system has special services for homeless kids as well, and combined efforts insure that a homeless child can continue to attend his or her home school. After school and summer programs for school-age kids are equally rich and diverse. A stand-out program that involves the University of Michigan community, called "Telling It," addresses the literacy and writing skills of kids who are at risk for dropping out of school. Despite early educational efforts, homeless kids experience academic failure disproportionately. The battle-weary say that, yes, kids fail in school, but schools also fail kids.

The statistics on homelessness among the young in America are as discouraging today as they have ever been.

see HOMELESS, page 11

"Children experiencing homelessness look and, for the most part, act just like all other children. They have happy and sad days, challenge limits, and tell amazing stories. They love treats, play, and attention, and need structure and routine... we work hard to help kids be kids – without the stress of wondering where they will sleep and if they will eat that night."

– Alpha House clinical director Peggy Galimberti

foundation for strong relationships in the future. For kids ages six and above, an impressive variety of after-school programs provide safety and enrichment, while freeing parents to pursue their own goals.

Longtime Alpha House clinical director Peggy Galimberti said, "Children experiencing homelessness look and, for the most part, act just like all other children. They have happy and sad days, challenge limits, and tell amazing stories. They love treats, play, and attention, and need structure and rou-

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Children going hungry is a growing issue in US

by Sarah H. Arshad
Groundcover Contributor

It comes as no surprise that we live in a country currently suffering an obesity epidemic, with obesity statistics growing as fast as Americans' waistlines. Millions of people spend billions of dollars every year on weight loss books, foods, classes, and diet products, according to popular polls. But what if you were one of the nearly 50 million Americans who lived in a food-insecure household? If you were a person not so much concerned about a few extra pounds and a New Year's resolution to hit the gym, but, in fact, stayed up at night anxious about finding enough to eat?

It's devastating to think that in one of the richest, most powerful countries in the world, so many go so hungry. It's even sadder that about 15 million of those who go hungry are children and adolescents—that's one in five kids. These are often children wrought in or around poverty, with parents who won't or can't provide for them. And in the challenge to make sure obese children learn how to live healthier lifestyles by eating more nutritiously and getting exercise, we need to make sure we don't forget about those who desperately need nutrition to survive.

I was inspired after reading *The Hunger Games* to talk to a friend of mine, I'll call her Anna, who shared her own struggles about growing up in poverty. Born to American parents of European descent, she may not fit the stereotype of what a "hungry American child" looks like. But she recalls a childhood adulterated by drive-by shootings, burning buildings, and living down the street from a cohort of meth labs. At the tender age of three, she discovered a gun in her front yard. A few years later, she saw a man wearing a trench coat, drenched in blood, get arrested

on her street. And to her, all of this was normal.

It was only as she advanced in school that she realized "how awful my clothing and hair were compared to what most of the other kids had...nothing ever matched, and we always went to the thrift store." She also recalls years living on welfare, eating whatever her mother managed to cook. Luckily for Anna, her mother was educated and cognizant of good nutrition—though they did not have much money, Anna's mother spent her food stamps on beans, lentils, vegetables, and fruits. This was in contrast, Anna told me, to the many others who live in poverty who try to subsist on plain white bread and Ramen noodles, foods severely lacking nutritive content. In addition, Anna's family received food boxes and commodities from local organizations, and friends would donate food when they had extra, even if it wasn't always palatable. Anna specifically recalls "seeing my mom take this long, nasty, limp carrot out of the box and asking her, 'we're eating that?'" She shrugged and responded, "It's food." And there were times Anna's mother did not eat so that her children had just a little bit more to fill their empty bellies.

I'm sure it's no shock that Anna grew up grateful for what she did have, and that she learned not to take things for granted. And even now, after graduating from an Ivy League college and working a full time job, she says, "I still buy 80 percent of what I own from thrift stores and I am proud of that fact—I save money and am helping recycle." While many classmates of hers now work in posh jobs in the financial sector and spend hundreds of dollars every week on food, she instead recalls delicacies born of necessity from her childhood, like dandelion soup and kidney bean muffins. However, she also admits

that the anxiety of not having enough to eat for so long makes her overeat now that she does have enough on her plate, if she is not careful. Even now, she must pay attention to her food, concentrating on eating what is sufficient instead of eating more due to the fear of not knowing when her next meal will be, as she did throughout her childhood.

Medical studies have, in fact, shown that children who suffer from hunger have poorer health outcomes. A case-control study conducted by Dr. Linda Weinreb from the University of Massachusetts Medical School entitled, *Hunger: Its Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health*, found that hungry children were more likely to be homeless, to have low birth weight, have more stressful life events, have higher chronic illness counts, and have increased amounts of internalizing behavior problems. The organization Share our Strength says that these children are sick more often, recover less often, are more likely to get hospitalized. They are also especially susceptible to obesity later in life. Additionally, these children were more likely to have parents who

suffered from depression, anxiety, or substance abuse, which again makes them vulnerable to unstable childhoods and poorer health outcomes. All in all, these children are hindered academically, and more likely to suffer emotional difficulties.

As the daughter of middle class immigrants, I was flummoxed by Anna's story, and the realities of so many people around me. I began looking into ways to donate time and money towards worthy causes fighting hunger in America, and came across the following organizations:

Food Gatherers, (www.foodgatherers.org), Feeding America (www.feedingamerica.org), Share our Strength (www.nokidhungry.org), Put Food on Your Table (putfoodonyourtable.com), and Palouse Food Bank (palousefoodbank.org). I urge you to consider looking into any of these organizations, or finding one that serves your local community, and trying to make a difference. There are hungry American kids out there that need your help.



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Generosity and gratitude



by Robert Salo
Groundcover Vendor

I often wonder why it is that people are so generous this time of year. With the economic downturn, these are certainly difficult times. Now I can begin to understand exactly the struggles our ancestors must have gone through.

We as vendors have to struggle with the weather. I recall it's said, "Wind, rain, snow or shine, the mail must get through."

The days are shorter. It's cold on the corner or street. Some of us seem depressed, being homeless and with limited funds, being without transportation, trying to get from point A to point B, trying to be part of a community. For others it is taking care of a loved one, spending all our time on this person.

We all know that it is better to give than to receive. There are a lot more struggles. I'm just naming a few I have witnessed.

On the other hand, we see so many acts of kindness. They don't pass by unnoticed. The day after Thanksgiving I was on my corner and Barbara, a customer, asked me if I was hungry. I answered her yes, and said I'm not alone, there are others. She went out of her way to get us all dinner at our corner during work.

When a prospective buyer says they do not have money, I often give them a paper. Generosity goes a long way. That's why I try to go out of my way, no matter what time of year. It always warms my heart to see a smile.

I remember as a child, with my classmates at school, at lunch-break, we would get together and if someone wanted something my mom had packed for me, I was always generous. I found out others would do the same and we began to share.

Like in an old Elvis movie, they're in a car on a road trip and one of the twins has a candy bar he breaks in two. You could just see the joy on both faces, giving and receiving, we all enjoy both.

I was in front of St. Joe's church in Ypsilanti and a customer handed me \$20 and said, "keep the paper." Vendor Shelley stated that she was on her corner and a person approached her and handed her \$20 and did not even take a copy of Groundcover. Vendor Rissa said the same thing and a customer brought her a sandwich. Vendor Mary stated that a customer would buy her a cup of coffee every morning at her corner.

Helping someone in need not only makes you feel good inside, it can be the start of a friendship. We are grateful to all our readers and those whose acts of generosity fill the world with kindness.

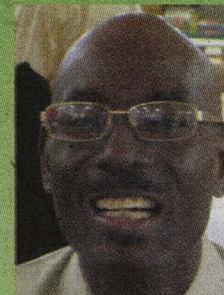


Thank you!

The Groundcover benefit was a huge success. Every seat was taken for dinner and an enthusiastic crowd clapped and danced to the music. While we don't yet have a final total, pass-the-bucket donations alone amounted to more than \$1,200, allowing us to fund a second round of matched savings accounts for our vendors. Your generosity will help someone save the money needed to move into an apartment or increase their earning potential.

Your Mouth Can Be Your Worst Enemy

by Shawn
Groundcover Vendor
(with a nod to Lao Tse, in quotes)



Your words and what you say have power to create conditions in your life.

For Instance,

If you say you can't stand your body, you can become sick.

If you say you can't find love, you will attract no one.

If you say you can't lose weight, you will stay fat.

If you say you say you can't live life, you will pass away.

Don't be afraid to say what's on your mind.

"Watch your thoughts, they become words.

Watch your words, they become action.

Watch your actions, they become habits.

Watch your habits, they become character."

If you settle for less, you'll get less than you settle for.

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Benefit dinner serves up chili and homeless awareness

by Lee Alexander
Groundcover Assistant Editor

The second Sunday in February, tempting aromas wafting into the sanctuary of St. Mary Student Parish during Mass enticed parishioners to gather in the church's Newman Center to raise awareness and funds for community groups combating homelessness. Members of the church's Lesbian and Gay Outreach Ministry (LGOM) prepared dinner for 130 and raised more than \$5,600 to help Washtenaw County's most vulnerable. Mark Thiesmeyer was co-organizer.

"We're glad that we decided early on that we weren't going to charge any admission for dinner," Thiesmeyer said, "but we'd just leave it to people to reach into their hearts and find out what they could give to this cause." Their approach was wildly successful.

LGOM members spent a great deal of time working to understand need within our community, and visited all the major service providers, asking lots and lots of questions. They organized their findings, created interesting posters filled with information that lined the dining room's walls. Members said what they discovered about local poverty, here in an area of relative affluence, surprised them.

"We found that need has shifted a lot in the last five years from individuals who are homeless to families who are homeless," Thiesmeyer said, "and because a family of a mother and her two or three children become homeless, there's three kids there. This makes children the fastest growing population of homeless. We knew that would resonate within the parish."

St. Mary has a strong history of public outreach. The church organizes service opportunities for members. They collect and donate funds for many local



Chili chefs at St. Mary, from left: Deacon Romolo Leone, Sarah Manning, Sandi Estep, Mary Howrey, Bob Strauss, Mark Thiesmeyer, Rommel Sagana, Aaron Van-Dyke, Rodrigo Cejas Goyanes

programs. Father Dan Reim is a priest at St. Mary. He said he believes that once parishioners understand an issue they're always eager to help.

"I was really impressed with the education pieces they did," Father Reim said. "They did a great job. As people were coming in and waiting in line they had a chance to look at a lot of really good information. And that was really the point of it all, to give members of our parish an opportunity to really learn more about hunger and homelessness in our area."

Sarah Manning was the LGOM member staffing the information table, piled overflowing with reams of educational material from major service providers spread across the region. She steered diners toward prospective programs and causes based on guest's questions and interests.

"I gave folks the five second outline of what these organizations do," Manning said. "I did pass out what I thought was most important, besides all the volunteer opportunities."

"It was good to see that people didn't just sit down with their food, eat it and leave. They looked at our posters, they looked at all the things on the table, and there was a lot to look at."

The chief reason St. Mary took on the challenge of addressing homelessness now is, while our economy is comparatively tepid, the resources

needed to deal with problems are spread ever thinner.

Agencies are simply making due with less while working to service more individuals. Budgets continue to be cut deeply.

"I'm no expert to say whether or not social safety nets should be entirely government, or if they should be partially government and partially charitable organizations," Thiesmeyer said, "but I can say that right now I don't think the social safety net that exists within our government is entirely adequate to support the massive numbers of homeless people who've recently become homeless in Washtenaw County."

County.

"It's shocking to hear a major politician say, 'I'm not concerned about the very poor.' I think we should all be concerned about the very poor."

See St. Mary Black Bean Chili

Recipe on page 10



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	5			4				2

Fill in the squares so that each row, column, and 3-by-3 box contain the numbers 1 through 9.

Cryptoquote

"ZLJNJ TIF PJ FV QJFEJN NJRJSIZMVF VG I KVTMJZU'K

KVAS ZLIF ZLJ HIU MF HLMTL MZ ZNJIZK MZK

TLMSONJF"

— FJSKVF EIFOJSI

Solutions on page 11

GROUNDCOVER VENDOR CODE

While Groundcover News is a nonprofit organization and newspaper vendors are considered contracted self-employers, we still have expectations of how vendors should conduct themselves while selling and representing the paper.

The following list is our Vendor Code of Conduct, which every vendor reads and signs before receiving a badge and papers. We request that if you discover a vendor violating any tenets of the Code, please contact us and provide as many details as possible. Our paper and our vendors should be positively impacting our County.

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- I agree not to sell additional goods or products when selling the paper or to panhandle, including panhandling with only one paper.
- I will wear and display my badge when selling papers.
- I will only purchase the paper from Groundcover News Staff and will

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- I agree to treat all customers, staff, other vendors respectfully. I will not "hard sell," threaten, harass or pressure customers, staff, or other vendors verbally or physically.
- I will not sell Groundcover News under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
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ACROSS

1. Woman's title
5. Use a keyboard
9. Bird
14. Elephant park in South Africa
15. Annie Oakley, Fidel Castro, many others
16. Commerce
17. Destitute
18. Sign over a "greasy spoon"
19. Ancient Roman political subdivision
20. Wandering
22. Jack, of television, stage, and screen
24. Pro sports team
25. Unanimous agreement?
27. Rodent
29. Famous stadium
30. Collection of similar items?
34. Television network (abbr.)
37. _____ Speedwagon
39. Means of recording
40. Puts on the stove
43. _____ and/or butts
44. Confuse
45. Courtyards
46. Money machine (abbr.)
47. Salt (French)
48. Appreciative?
50. Demons
54. Valuable stone
55. Lack of self-control?
59. Bean curd
62. Doctor's group (abbr.)
65. Oklahoman
66. Take advantage
68. Tools
70. One of the Marianas
71. Foot bones
72. Request
73. Recovery Act of 2009 (abbr.)
74. Hilo greeting
75. Liquidate
76. Federal agent Eliot

DOWN

1. 1940s Yankee outfielder
2. Love
3. Decorate
4. Swamp
5. Decoration for January to November?
6. Approval
7. Cookware

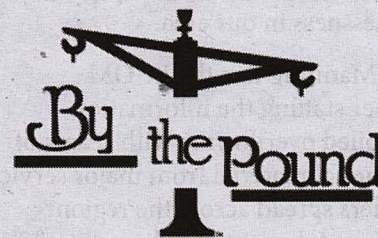
Dissimulation & Misinterpretation

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71						72				73		
74						75					76	

8. ExxonMobil subsidiary
9. Common abbreviation
10. Happy? Content?
11. Difficult to find
12. Make corrections
13. Drinks
21. Federal agency (abbr.)
23. Metal-bearing rock
26. Of the nostrils
28. Michigan city
30. Celestial
31. Does arithmetic
32. Khartoum's river
33. Old Testament woman
34. African nation
35. Greek letter
36. Asian garment
38. Newt

41. Unable to differentiate?
42. Protected
49. Actress Thurman
51. Summoning?
52. Type of insurance (abbr.)
53. Catch phrase
56. Acclimate
57. Approaches
58. Bombeck's namesakes
59. Vehicle manufacturer
60. Ellipse
61. Card game
63. Charts
64. Wheel connector
67. Japanese pop singer
69. Fish

Puzzle by Jeff Richmond



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Failing in big love: Valentine's Day for a broken-hearted social activist

by Sir Writeous Upgrayedd

This is my debut Groundcover article. Due to the need to protect the identities of those involved, I must keep my name a secret. I am at liberty to reveal I'm a black man from Detroit in my mid-thirties, and a father, house-husband and emissary of Christ's Divine Kingdom of Love. Also, I'm a new part time resident at Camp Take Notice tent city and I'm a love-sick/heartbroken social activist who's pursuing the most radical social justice, reformation dream of the early 21st century. In this article, I will share my recent struggles in an unusual love affair and a shift in my consciousness regarding a taboo area of social justice.

We live in a world that makes it very hard to love on the scale needed for true healing and equity to manifest. Humanity's capacity to love is being systemically eroded under the guise of peace, mobility, and abundance. We have enough love to cope, but we've been divided and rendered unable to generate enough love to decisively overcome critical problems such as:

debt and fossil fuel dependency, broken families, high incarceration rates, homelessness, stress, and diseases like cancer and diabetes. As long time social activist Grace Lee Boggs puts it, "Everyone who lives in our capitalistic society has been damaged by it."

Our challenge is not only generating enough love to heal and evolve, but to do so in enough time to protect ourselves from the deferred costs from over 200 years of industrialism—absorbed by the planet and humanity—bearing down on us.

Motivated by this sense of urgency and zeal, I became convinced that polygyny—a form of marriage in which a man has two or more wives—should be seriously pursued and promoted as a viable family arrangement option, especially among African Americans.

After stumbling upon this taboo subject of polygyny, I approached my wife with the idea and the possibility of creating a polygynous (or plural) family ourselves, in which she would share me with sister-wives. My wife and I are naturally passionate about the African

American community and social activism in general. And being a busy couple with children, we struggle, like most, with the dizzying demands of modern life. So, in my mind, plural marriage is a very attractive option for amplifying the effectiveness of a household. But, my wife told me that she was not ready to have that discussion.

Being the proactive and radical social activist that I am, I proceeded (despite my fears) to learn more about the subject, and to assess and encourage public interest in it. I learned that people were indeed interested in plural marriage. In fact, people in many circles are discussing the topic. The popularity of HBO's Big Love and TLC's Sister-Wives have sparked much interest in plural families.

Ultimately, I became interested in a particular woman who I thought would be a great fit to begin upgrading our family. I tried to have a dialog with my wife about my interest, but my wife's fears stalled my attempt. All the while, my interests grew into a mutual attraction. So my next step was to introduce

them on Facebook, but that didn't work. Then (at a not so good a time) I told my wife about my growing feelings for the other woman and my desire for us all to meet, be friends, and discuss the possibility of being a plural family.

My wife was infuriated at my audacity and naivety. The next thing I knew, I was asked to leave and began residing at the Camp Take Notice tent city.

It's been a bittersweet experience. I'm remorseful about hurting my wife. Thankfully, she forgave me and we've been mending. Our relationship has reached a new level of love and understanding. I've since shut down my Facebook page. And the prospective sister-wife, has nobly distanced herself.

In light of the big picture, I'm convinced I made some mistakes but I did the right thing. On one hand, I'm embarrassed that I proceeded as such while my wife wasn't onboard with the idea of plural families; on the other, I feel that I did my duty, in the face of personal risk, to explore the possibility of improving the hopes and quality of lives for others.

Explaining homelessness to children is a challenge

continued from page 3

ity. Perhaps we need to think about homelessness, not "the homeless." This approach zooms the camera out and looks at the issue, rather than incorrectly creating this "us versus them" mentality. Additionally, just as we want to avoid ascribing homelessness merely to personal responsibility, addressing homelessness on the individual level can be short-sighted and lack the capacity for long-term change. While giving food or money to someone that asks and is in need is certainly useful, such small actions do not treat the fundamental issues of poverty that underlie homelessness. Thus, if we want to help "the homeless" – the people – we must address "homelessness" – the issue – with all its underlying causes, through collective activism and social change. We must support programs such as

Groundcover News, Alternatives for Girls, and Food Gatherers, that work to address causes of homelessness such as lack of employment opportunities or available health care.

So, as my daughter sat that morning in the park, staring at me, I have to admit: I was flustered. I probably gave her an answer that was too much for her to wrap her little two-and-a-half-year-old head around. But the fact that the explanation for homelessness is complex does not mean we should over-simplify it. Solutions arise from explanation. If homelessness is indeed the fault of those who are homeless, then it is up to them to solve the problem. But if we believe homelessness is a multifaceted, complex social issue, perhaps we will address it in multifaceted, complex, creative, and empowering ways.

Homeless children

continued from page 2

bruises heal. Who is more vulnerable? I don't know. Who has the drug addicted Mom? She will go to her girlfriend's house rather than a shelter when she becomes homeless. The family in the shelter may have no extended family to go to at all and they are looking at the shelter or the street. Doubled-up homeless students are indeed homeless. They should be counted and served by schools and housing assistance.

Counting homeless individuals who are only in shelters, cars or abandoned buildings is like only counting the birds in nests. The birds in the air are more difficult to count. They move a lot. But we don't debate that they are birds. Homeless doubled-up children are homeless. Doubled-up or in shelter does not determine their vulnerability.

The bill passed out of subcommittee and is now under consideration by the full subcommittee.

HOMELESS

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Food with friends can be fun *AND* healthy

by Rissa Haynes
Groundcover Vendor

Remember the days of your youth? When friends got together, it was always like a party. The games were great! The conversation was crazy! The food was fantastic! Well, THAT was if you didn't know it was good FOR you. Of course, as the incurable optimist, I believe even teens can love healthy food, too.

As I see it, food ought to ALWAYS taste good, whether dining in or out, alone or with others, healthy or not. Keeping a few things in mind, a tasty recipe can always be made healthily. First thing to remember is avoid the KEVORKIAN FOUR. What is that? Those are

four ingredients that are deadly for healthy living: 1) hydrogenated fats, 2) processed sugars, 3) sodium nitrates, and 4) white flour. Second thing to remember is to season well. Keep in mind that some good substitutions for the above Kevorkian Four can make a great health improvement without affecting the goodness of the taste of the food. For example, sea salt is a great substitute for sodium nitrates. Real butter (preferably organic from antibiotic/hormone-free cows) instead of margarines that have hydrogenated oils is excellent and usually has a better taste also. Sweetness can come from various healthy alternatives. Just avoid the artificial sweeteners. Taste-testing the various Stevia derivatives

is recommended in order to discover which sweetener you like best. The idea is to stay as close to nature-made sweetness as possible. Many sweet products may use real fruit juices. Sometimes sweetness is provided through coconut juice, agave nectar, and honey. For kids, good taste is essential. Let's just keep it a secret that it is also healthy.

Here's an easy one my whole family loves. When it's made, don't tell anyone the ingredients!

Mashed Faux-Taters

1 head cauliflower
Butter
Can of full-bodied, organic coconut

milk
Sea salt, pepper and other seasonings to taste

DIRECTIONS:

Steam cauliflower until mushy soft

Place in food processor and process until lump-free

Mix in a stick of butter (or more if you desire a more buttery taste)

Add sea salt, pepper and seasoning (according to what you usually put in your mashed potatoes)

Stir in coconut milk (according to the desired consistency of your mashed potatoes: start with about 1/4 can if you like it moderately thick; add more if you like your mashed potatoes thinner.

Skillet Shepherd's Pie

courtesy of Susan Beckett

I created variations of this recipe during the week my family and I participated in the Food Stamp Challenge – subsisting on what food we could muster on \$3 per person/per day. The following recipe was a big hit with my teenage son and daughter.

3 large potatoes, peeled and sliced about 1/4 inch thick
1 onion, peeled and diced (or 2 green onions for variation)

1 green pepper, chopped (substitute any pepper you prefer)
3 sausages (or 1/3 pound ground beef or soy burger or soy sausages)
1/3 lb. sliced or grated cheddar cheese
1 tsp. chili pepper (or other favorite spices) and salt and pepper to taste
6 tablespoons oil

Heat one tablespoon oil in a large skillet over medium heat add and stir half the chili powder and cook the onions until slightly soft, about 4 minutes. Add green pepper and cook 2 minutes.

Remove from the pan and set aside. Cook the meat in the same pan with the other half of the chili powder. Remove and cut into small pieces. Stir into the onions and peppers.

Add 2 tablespoons oil to the pan, wait for it to heat up, then add a layer of potatoes. Turn when bottom is golden brown, about 3 minutes. Once both sides are cooked, remove and do another batch, adding and heating oil each time. When you have flipped the final layer, leave the potatoes in the pan

and start assembly.

Reduce heat to medium-low. Put a thin layer of the meat mixture over the potatoes and top with a thin layer of cheese. Add another layer of potatoes, meat, cheese and continue until all ingredients are used, ending with a layer of cheese. Cover and heat until warmed through and cheese is melted, about 5 minutes if starting with warm ingredients. Serves 4.

Black Bean Chili

courtesy of Aaron Van Dyke

1 medium onion, peeled and chopped
2 t. minced garlic
2 t. olive oil
3 cans (14.5 oz each) black beans, rinsed and drained
1 can (14.5 oz) crushed tomatoes
1 1/2 t. ground cumin
1/4 c. chopped fresh cilantro
1 T. chipotle (or regular) chili powder
1 T. rice vinegar
salt
sour cream
avocado

Directions

1. In a 3- to 4-quart pan over medium-high heat, cook onion and garlic in olive oil, stirring often, until onion is limp and starting to brown, 6 to 8 minutes.

2. Add beans, tomatoes and their juice, cumin, and 1/2 cup water; bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, to blend flavors, about 15 minutes.

3. Stir in cilantro, chipotle chili powder, and rice vinegar. Add salt to taste.

4. Top w/ sour cream, cheese, additional onions and/or diced avocado.

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Homeless kids' well-being in Michigan ranks low in the U.S.

continued from page 4

Indeed, in a recent update to their 2010 report "America's Youngest Outcasts," the National Center of Family Homelessness (NCFH) states that homelessness caused by Hurricane Katrina was disastrous, but the damage to families brought about by the "human hurricane" of greed and mismanagement (from the financial crisis that began in 2007) has been even worse. There was a bounce of recovery after Katrina, as families relocated and started new lives. But the poverty caused by the economic downturn has not yet begun to heal. Compounding that catastrophe are changes in government funding that have damaged our housing safety net.

The NCFH has written a report card for each state, assessing the extent of homelessness, child well-being, the risk for homelessness and state policy and planning efforts. Among the fifty states, Michigan has a composite score of 22, thus landing somewhere near the middle (1 being best, 50 worst). For Michigan, there is both good news and bad news: In the area of state policy and planning efforts, we score fourth in the nation – good news! But in the area of child well-being, Michigan's rank is 39, just above most of the southern states.

Here are some things we know about homeless children nationwide: Families make up roughly one-third of the entire homeless population. Approximately 1.6 million children will experience homelessness over the course of a year, and on any given day, an estimated 200,000 children have no place to live. Among all homeless women, 60 percent have children under age 18, and more than half are separated from their children. Among homeless fathers, only 7 percent live with their children. Single-parent families (mostly headed by mothers) are among the poorest and the most likely to experience homelessness. Some two parent family units are broken up, with some shelters forbid-

ding access to fathers and even boys past age 12.

Among the nation's working families, 10 million are poor or near poor. "On average, families need an income twice as high as the Federal Poverty Level to meet their most basic needs," according to the December 2011 NCFH report "The Characteristics and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness." The stock of reasonably-priced housing has been on the decrease for decades. In fact, federal support for public housing fell by 49 percent between 1980 and 2003. This suggests a profound change in our social values. The NCFH reports that "5.8 million units are needed to fill the gap in affordable housing for extremely low-income households."

Wages have not kept up with the rising cost of homes, whether you own or rent. Families at or below the official poverty line, and even those who are somewhat above that standard simply cannot afford to pay for the housing available to them. Housing problems, which have changed the lives of many Americans recently, affect the poor disproportionately. But people struggle and manage to hang on until something besides housing gives way: a job is gone, illness strikes, self-destructive behaviors set in, and homelessness results.

Researchers say that there are many, often interacting, factors leading to the loss of a home. The list includes lack of employment, mental and physical health problems, limited education, communal and family violence, and the lack of access to social support systems. We are told that the problems run deep, sometimes spanning generations, according to the Family Housing Fund of Minneapolis. But saying so does not mean that our society's excessive tolerance for poverty is not implicated in nearly every factor just cited.

According to social research, homeless kids have witnessed more violence than

their peers, including partner abuse at home. This is a predictor of their own violent behavior in the future. These children experience more chaos and unpredictability than housed children do. The adults who care for them are often unreliable or emotionally unavailable, due to multiple stressors in their own lives. The routines that give life its stability are easily eroded. With hunger and food insecurity a daily reality, schoolwork and social life go by the board. Because of multiple relocations, school attendance is at risk, as is health care. As a result, homeless children are at great risk of failing to attain physical, social and intellectual milestones.

We know that kids don't have an adult's ability to identify their feelings or find the words to express them. Very often, children convey strong feelings indirectly, either by attacking others or withdrawing into themselves. Behind the blows of an aggressive child lies fear and a sense of abandonment, and the tears of a sad child may be fueled by anger and self-repression.

Here is how SOS executive director Faye Askew-Kings summed up her description of homeless children's vulnerabilities: "Their brains look like the brains of people with post-traumatic stress disorder." The symptoms include poor self-regulation, blocking of feelings, difficulty concentrating and learning, and generally speaking, either externalizing (aggression, disobedience) or internalizing (anxiety, depression, guilt) of psychic pain. In the words of The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSW), "The experience of homelessness results in a loss of community, routines, possessions, privacy, and security. Children, mothers, and families who live in shelters need to make significant adjustments to shelter living and are confronted by other problems" – including ones related specifically to the children, such as physical illnesses. The NCTSW also

notes that "the stresses associated with homelessness can exacerbate other trauma-related difficulties and interfere with recovery due to ongoing traumatic reminders and challenges."

But instead of continuing this catalog of misfortune, let us pause and try to focus on what else is going on, what some call "structural" problems, or, the way society works that makes all the personal misfortune likelier to occur in the first place. We should remember that the disruptive and non-nurturing factors associated with childhood homelessness are present in the lives of all very poor children. It's just that the level of distress and impairment is often higher when homelessness is added. We must be thankful that, here in Washtenaw County, we have committed people with the skills and determination to reach out and change the lives of these kids and their families, working together and stretching all available resources. Money – also known as resources, economic security, income, bread on the table, purchasing power, and just plain power – is an unavoidable element in any discussion of homelessness. It is a big part of the problem and an equally big part of the solution.

When I asked Ms. Whitlock and Ms. Kennedy of SOS what they would ask for if they could wave a magic wand, they both said, "funding, money, affordable housing" (and maybe we should add, caring people with a little extra time).

Over twenty agencies and civic groups deliver services to the county's homeless families, implementing programs geared toward each age group served. All the county services rely to some extent on volunteers. Think about what you can offer and consider lending a hand. For more information about volunteering, contact the volunteer coordinator at SOS, 734-485-8730. More information at: www.soscs.org

CRYPTOQUOTE

Solution

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

— Nelson Mandela

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Standing down for area veterans means standing up for their needs

by David KE Dodge
Groundcover Contributor

On Saturday, February 18, 2012 the Washtenaw Homeless Veterans Task Force put on an event called the Washtenaw County Stand Down, at the auditorium at the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare Service (VAAHS). Numerous agencies, including different offices of the VA itself, Michigan Works, the Red Cross, the League

of Women Voters, the Washtenaw County Veteran Affairs Office, various service organizations, and Groundcover News, provided attending veterans with information and supplies such as drinking mugs, blankets and grooming aids.

Outside the building, a unit of the U.S. military erected a food tent and provided both hot meals and cold sandwiches, salads, and pastries to

the attending public and the service providers. Clothing, blankets and other necessities were also on-hand for the taking. Midshipmen at University of Michigan's ROTC program served as guides to lead the public from the front door of the VAAHS to the auditorium. That much planning and work transpired to stage the event was evident in how smoothly things went for the providers, and in the number of attendees.

The term "Stand Down" refers to the period of rest and relaxation given to servicemen in wartime, to enable them to recover from battle fatigue, so as to be able to return to the front for further fighting. A quick internet search reveals that numerous cities and counties across the nation are sites of "Veterans Stand Downs," where homeless veterans

receive assistance from the local community resources.

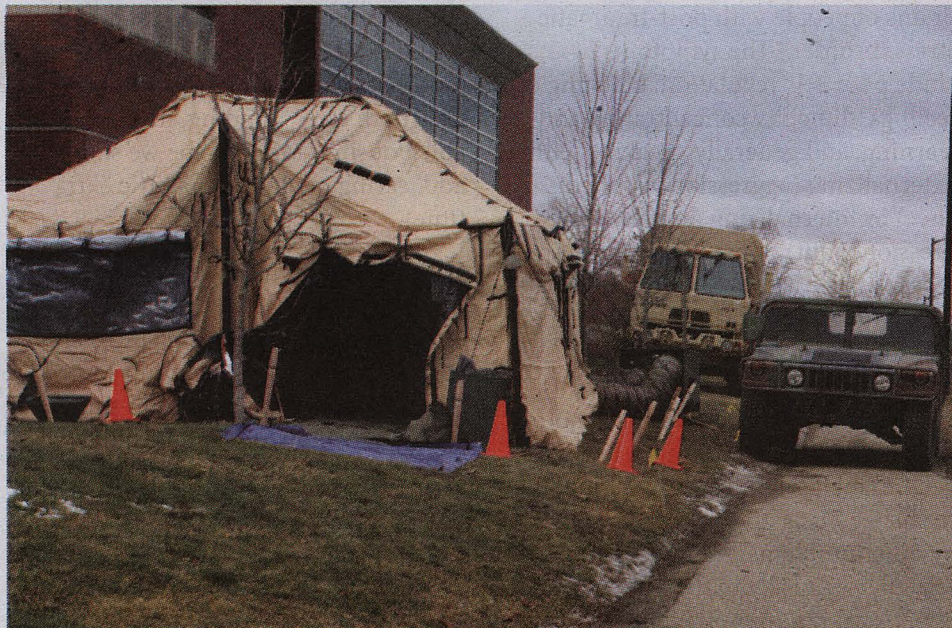
February 18 was the first occasion of the Washtenaw Stand Down; the sponsors are hoping to continue it as an annual event.

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VA Stand Down debut: Ann Arbor VA held its first "Stand Down against homelessness" on Saturday February 16, 2012 and Groundcover News was there along with many other groups that help veterans who are in need of housing and other resources. The term "Stand Down" comes from a military reference meaning a temporary stop of offensive action.

ABOVE: Heated Army tent containing clothing, blankets and other necessities and a wide selection of prepared food for the veterans.

TOP: Volunteers preparing food in the VA tent for veterans in need of meals.

Photos by David KE Dodge

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So you want to start a business? Turn to these groups for help

by Susan Beckett
Publisher

With 13 million unemployed workers in the U.S. and four people looking for work for every available job, job creation is at the top of everyone's list. Options for financing traditional businesses are pretty limited. Banks now rarely lend to new restaurants or stores and they are not interested in making loans of less than \$20 thousand.

People starting a low-tech or service business in Washtenaw County will most likely need to self-finance or get a non-traditional loan. If you live in Washtenaw County and have an idea for a high-tech business, especially in health care, there are a number of incubators and accelerators to get your business off the ground and ramped up for hiring. There are many resources for technology-based companies and the free seminars presented by area high-tech accelerators are open to everyone.

CEED

People who can document that they have been turned down twice by banks but have a viable business plan, might be able to get financing through the Center for Empowerment and Economic Development (CEED). They make loans ranging from \$500 to \$50,000 to businesses in Washtenaw County and have additional money, the Eastern Washtenaw MicroLoan fund, for businesses that are located east of U.S. 23. CEED is more focused on growth than development. About 80 percent of the businesses they support got started on their own but utilized a CEED loan to reach a sustainable level. The organization also counsels owners on unconventional funding strategies.

They recently helped a florist who could not afford to order sufficient inventory for Valentine's Day. At the suggestion of CEED's staff, the florist contacted customers from the previous year who had placed large orders, and offered them a 5 percent discount for pre-paying this year, and used those payments to fund a bulk order.

CEED offers self-paced instruction materials on developing a business plan and the ins and outs of financing, available as free downloads to anyone who requests them. They also certify women-owned businesses, and offer a business conference for women, a course for women on how to bid on contracts, and matchmaking and support services for women.

POWER, Inc.

Low-income people might be able to start a business utilizing an Individual Development Account (IDA) through POWER, Inc. Government funds match IDA savings on a two-to-one basis for



Above, from left: Think Tech entrepreneurs Gene Tam and Vijay Mehra with Eric Pless of Blue Bridge in their Spark office

Below: A group of techies discuss ideas at the Northern Tech Brewery

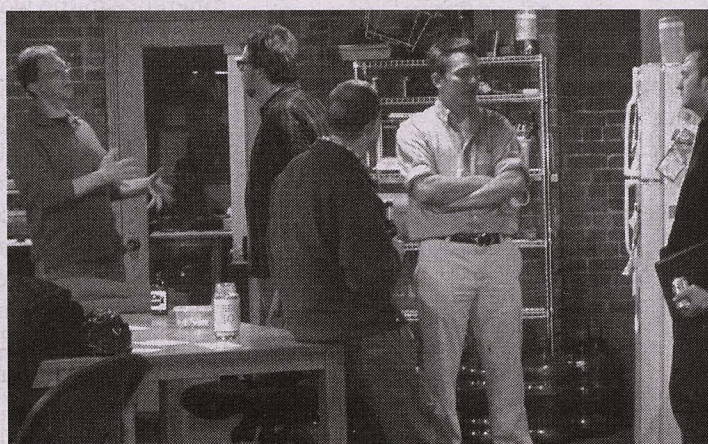
the acquisition of a specific business asset, like a lawn mower or truck.

SPARK – a public/private partnership

As part of their mission to establish the area as a desirable place for businesses, SPARK presents monthly on topics like marketing, bringing products to market and planning. They film and stream these presentations live along with archiving them on their website for viewing at any time. They develop offerings such that they can be replicated across the state.

SPARK has their own company incubators (low-cost rental space with shared copiers and telecommunications systems for start-ups) and business accelerator programs in three locations. SPARK tenants may also benefit from accelerator grants that assist in the early stages of development, such as developing a model that demonstrates financial viability. Their Plymouth office is designed specifically for companies working in the life sciences. It features special lab and testing equipment that companies use to test the viability of pharmaceuticals.

The rent for physical tenants in Ann Arbor or Ypsilanti is \$250 per month, while virtual tenants, who get the use of the address and conference rooms and some office equipment but no desk or dedicated internet, pay only \$95 per month. The Ann Arbor office is next to Liberty Plaza and often networks with U-M students and faculty. They look for high growth companies with the ability to reach five million dollars in revenue within five years of forming a company. They support emerging and growing companies in the area's driving industries, if the company is technology focused and innovative.



One of SPARK's most valuable services is connecting businesses with the resources they need, including potential employees. They network with local universities, local businesses, volunteers and government agencies. An innovative program running at SPARK East is a 12-week course that teaches the fundamentals of computer programming in high-demand languages to creative, high-aptitude people looking for work. The program, Shifting Codes, had 800 potential participants show up at the initial informational meeting. If the pilot group of 35 find success with local companies, the program will run regularly and be replicated in other areas around the state.

Participant Maggie LaNoue said, "I love the Shifting Code class even though it is very challenging. I have been self-employed for 30 years and things have gotten harder being in the art business with the current economy. Plus, I am now a widow and my art has just not been enough to make ends meet. I did start creating websites back in 1995, and last year I started to teach myself Drupal – a new kind of website."

SPARK's mission of attracting and retaining high growth companies depends greatly on offering a strong talent pool. Vijay Mehra of ThinkTech Labs, a vertical sales integration software company that relocated from New York to the SPARK incubator, is considering filling his programmer

needs by offering his own language and implementation cycle course for U-M Information Technology students nearing graduation.

On the decision to relocate to Ann Arbor, Mehra commented, "It was difficult for us to have any advantage there [New York City]. The tech companies were not concentrated. Here, you turn a corner and find three or four. And the costs are so much lower here."

Another of SPARK's tenants, I-3D, whose software detects broken water pipes, elected to settle in Ann Arbor because the cost of an office and hiring two Python programmers here is only 60 percent of what the cost would have been in San Francisco, the home of one partner.

It was on the recommendation of a mentor that OR Tech Systems took up residence at SPARK. The presence of the Southeast Michigan Health Care information Exchange and their work on electronic medical records made Ann Arbor the best strategic location for developing their universal platform for wireless transmission of health care records and payments. (See interview on p. B3)

SPARK East is located in downtown Ypsilanti and has the widest scope for companies it assists. According to manager Kyle DeBord, "One of the things that's nice about Ypsilanti is that there are a lot of resources for people starting small businesses in the area. Just down the street in the Key Bank building is the Michigan Small Business and Technology Development Center, the local branch of the Small Business Administration. They work with businesses at all stages and it's free."

Together, they offer numerous courses that range from how to write a business plan to strategies for business expansion. They partner with SCORE (retired executives who serve as mentors), which works out of Cleary University and with the Eastern Michigan University School of Business, Student Economic Club, and Collegiate Entrepreneurship Organization to foster businesses and place students with companies as interns. DeBord notes that so many of the local businesses are one- or two-person operations that interns are essential for freeing the owners up from tending the cash register so they can explore opportunities for growth. SPARK is also working with Ypsilanti High School to provide students with Individual Education Plans the opportunity to spend their afternoons doing volunteer work with local businesses to help them develop soft

see ENTREPRENEUR, page B2

Entrepreneurs have lots of help if they know where to look

continued from page B1
business skills.

Two successful businesses have graduated from the Spark East incubator. VC Web Services has taken up residence on Washington St. in Ypsilanti, and Clean Suite Inspections, a green cleaning and supply service, is now headquartered in Ypsilanti Township.

Start-ups currently in residence include one that is working on neuroplasticity to aid in recovery from brain trauma, and another whose product verbally reminds people to wash their hands before exiting a restroom, which is said to be 80 percent more likely to result in compliance than is a written reminder.

Northern Tech Brewery

Cultivating a culture of entrepreneurship and creating local jobs from the bottom up is the mission of the Northern Tech Brewery. It offers shared, short-term office space, as does the Workantile Exchange, but it distinguishes itself through its collaborative environment. Independent entrepreneurs share ideas freely and welcome the tech community at large each Friday at 4:30 for further ping-ponging of ideas and networking.

Most of the businesses at the Tech Brewery are software related, but there is one social venture with a physical product. Hearing Health Science markets a mint called Soundbites, a nutraceutical that helps protect cilia in the ears to prevent hearing loss. The founders were motivated by the many returning soldiers with diminished hearing. Some are combat-related injuries while other soldiers lost hearing as a side-effect of some anti-malarial and tuberculosis medications. Taking Soundbites prior to exposure minimizes damage.

Richard Bollinger comes to some of the “beer 30” gatherings at the Tech Brewery to socialize and exchange ideas with fellow software enthusiasts. Bollinger commented, “Entrepreneurs have to walk the first two miles in the desert on their own; no shoes, no water. A rules change [at SPARK] last summer

allowed loans to commercialize IT [information technology], so now I’m applying for a micro-loan.” According to Tech Brewery founder Dug Song, SPARK caters to more traditional industries, and businesses have to go through many rounds of proposals and presentations before they can get started.

University graduate students also frequent the Friday fests, checking out ideas and trolling for jobs. According to Song, a cool idea can attract a topnotch student programmer willing to work at bargain prices.

Song organized a2geeks, a group which sponsors meet-ups in collaboration with others around town such as Ann Arbor SPARK and the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. Twice a month, five local companies showcase their concepts and business plans and get feedback from the audience.

Ann Arbor’s growing reputation as the “Bay Area of the Mid-West” is greatly enhanced by the presence of serial entrepreneurs like Song. Their passion to create and lead often extends to fostering others and connecting new businesses with private funding sources. The rapid exchange of ideas and resources has a synergistic creative effect that erupts into rapid development of new ideas and technologies. Song benefited greatly from that environment in Silicon Valley and is doing his best to create an innovation cluster here.

TechArb

U-M students have an incubator of their own – TechArb, a joint venture of the U-M Center for Entrepreneurship and the Ross School of Business Zell Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies. It started as a summer experiment three years ago and has since launched close to 100 companies, of which more than 20 are still in business. Mobiata, creator of FlightTrack, has since been purchased by Expedia but retains its own identity and headquarters in Nickels Arcade; OWN, a cloud-based point of sale system that runs on a

tablet and informs stores of their clients’ preferences and buying habits, has an office in Detroit; Are You a Human, is a puzzle-based alternative to reading fuzzy writing, known as CAPTCHA, to distinguish human computer users from robots.

To be accepted by TechArb, a business must be run by a team, with an idea that is solid, disruptive, impactful and scalable. In other words, it must be viable and change the way the world operates while making a positive difference in the world for a significant number of people.

Of the current 22 businesses, roughly half are spearheaded by undergrads and the rest by graduate students or students who recently graduated but started their businesses while they were still in school. Businesses benefit from free office space, mentoring by alumni and local entrepreneurs, idea sharing among themselves, access to a network of investors, and the possibility of a \$10,000 grant so they can work on their businesses during the summer.

Current TechArb business developers appreciate being connected to business experts and mentors who guide them in turning their ideas into products. Lydia Muwanga, founder of I Heart Art, said, “TechArb is like a garden.”

Muwanga is exploring her idea for a mobile app that recommends to people art that they are likely to find meaningful. An early version will get a trial run at the Prison Creative Arts Project exhibit at the Duderstadt gallery on March 20. The app will provide in-depth information about the artists and their work. Eventually, it will learn users’ tastes based on what they explore and make suggestions.

Design Innovations for Infants and Mothers Everywhere co-founder Gillian Henker responded to Ghanaian doctors’



Co-owner Karl Osterland by his Ypsilanti storefront. Fastemps got bridge funding from CEED so they could hire 390 workers for FedEx over the holidays. They needed a loan of \$33 thousand to meet their first payroll. That money was on the streets within the week, bolstering the local economy.

Below, from left: Developers Gillian Henker of DIIME, Ricardo Rodriguez of YouTrivia, and Lydia Muwanga of I Heart Art in the Tech Arb office.



need for recycling blood lost during operations by designing an autologous blood transfusion device. It looks like a giant syringe that sucks up the blood that has spilled into stomach, filters it, and bags it so it can be transfused back to the patient it came from. That avoids the need for expensive blood typing and screening for disease that the raises the cost of blood to \$50 per pint in the developing world and \$200 in the U.S. The group was able to work on the project through the summer thanks to a TechArb summer scholarship grant of \$10,000 and a collegiate student grant. The group is now working with local manufacturers to design a cost-effective manufacturing process. They hope to do a clinical pilot in Ghana later this year. This is a great example of TechArb’s commitment to being impact-driven – making an ongoing difference in the world and bringing forth something needed that would otherwise not exist.

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Q and A: Meet the Creators of OR Tech Systems, LLC

by La Shawn Courtwright
Groundcover Vendor

OR Tech Systems recently relocated from New York City to offices at Ann Arbor Spark. Groundcover reporter-vendor La Shawn Courtwright struck up a conversation with OR co-founder Frank-James (Jim) Brown. He was so interesting that she set up the following formal interview about the company, Jim, and his co-founder, Po Lui.

La Shawn Courtwright: Where are you from?

Jim Brown: I was born in Accra, Ghana and Po Lui was born in Hong Kong, China.

LSC: What is OR Tech Systems LLC?

JB: OR Tech Systems is a start-up company based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Our goal is to:

- Give physicians, nurses and authorized medical personnel the freedom to share patient medical information outside of their current medical networks.

- Allow patients to view their own medical information on any internet-capable device.
- Provide an interoperable platform for online merchants and buyers to perform transactions irrespective of the current closed loop payment infrastructure deployed by their financial institutions.

LSC: What might that look like?

JB: For example, a soldier might have data at a government VA hospital and with their private physician in the civilian space. That results naturally in a distributed environment and providing access for authorization requires a higher level of identity and/or the use of digital credentials than previously necessary to automate the process. User ID and Password is not going to go away but needs to be buttressed by higher strength levels of credentials to mitigate the risk of a data breach, which in healthcare, can be expensive.

LSC: How did you start OR Tech Systems?

JB: OR Tech Systems started as a discussion of notes Po and I had about wireless financial payments. We recognize that wireless payment and the online payment arena is still young. While there are large institutional payment providers, we believe in coming years new payment solutions will be deployed. As such, financial institutions have to be able to provide their clients access to payments regardless of wireless device, online payment solution or security infrastructure. That prompted us to develop our initial agnostic [environment-neutral] payment solution. While financial institutions understood the problem, "the question" was always, "Who are our clients?" The answer is healthcare institutions. We knew that healthcare represented one-quarter of the U.S. gross domestic product. Healthcare also is a central "cradle to grave" industry that touches everyone's life and plays a part in every industry.

Since we first sat down and discussed this problem and our business venture, Po and I have funded every effort. Both

of us have spent every day committed to making the dream a reality.

LSC: When did you think of starting this business and when was it launched?

JB: OR Tech Systems was a concept that was conceived in 2004. Since that time, Po and I have forged ahead trying to understand the needs of the industry and working to develop a means of software development. OR Tech Systems was first launched in New York State under the corporate title of OR Technology, LLC in 2006.

LSC: In what ways do you two feel privileged to live and work as entrepreneurs in America?

JB: America is and continues to be the land of opportunity if a person is committed to put in the work and ask for help. As fellow students of history, we realize that we are just following in the footsteps of others who came here to build a better life. As entrepreneurs, we also realize the satisfaction in being creators. Even still, Po and I have been

see **NEW TECH SYSTEMS**, page B4

.OR

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- 1-2 years in Issue/Task Management
- 2-3 years in a cross-team collaboration situations
- 2 years familiarity with OLAP/SQL reporting technologies

OR Tech Systems, LLC
330 East Liberty, Lower Level
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

New tech system business finds a home in Ann Arbor

continued from page B3

fortunate in being able to have help from organizations such as Ann Arbor Spark.

LSC: In what way or ways do you want to redefine America?

JB: We don't want to define or change anything in America. The America that we love is the country where multiple ideas and beliefs can be expressed without fear of criticism and anger.

The only thing we want to cultivate is the same enjoyment of creating business for the next generation of minority students in Michigan and/or New York. Our message to them is, "You can do anything and be anything if you just believe in yourself." I know it's a cliché, but it's true.

LSC: Why Michigan?

JB: Our mentor Mick Talley Lead, Independent Director and Chairman of the Audit Committee of the University Bancorp of Ann Arbor and a Director of the Southeast Michigan Health Information Exchange (SEMHE), suggested we work in Ann Arbor. Ann Arbor is "ground zero" for healthcare information technology.

But most importantly, Michigan is our adopted home, we want the opportunity to help build and continue to bring innovation to the state. OR Tech Systems is just one of many businesses looking to make positive changes a reality.

Southeast Michigan has been very active in healthcare information technology and very proactive in looking for solutions which are collaboratively based. Michigan understands the need for a solution which is a result of private/public collaboration and serves the needs of a regional group with "its feet on the ground." This area is active in development of innovative technologies to solve generic problems and perhaps will result in economic development

and growth. We want to be a part of that.

The problem of "identity" in providing appropriate access is a regional, national and international activity and many other countries are grappling with securely sharing data. What most governments have missed in their solutions is that patients move around, and a solution which works in one country might not work for a patient who needs medical attention in another country. The same is true of states. Michigan is unique in that its citizens and I like to travel to Canada and Ohio and sometimes seek medical care in those places. What works in Michigan, has to work in other regions. This is the business case for the use of standards and to provide for interoperability. God forbid, I go back to Ghana and get sick or Po goes back to Hong Kong and needs treatment. Our healthcare data has to be available wherever we happen to be or get sick or injured. The payments, as people want to get paid, have to flow with us as we live our lives and travel around the country and the world.

LSC: Since Groundcover is a newspaper that generally deals with struggles in life, it would be worthwhile to know the kinds of struggles and obstacles that you and Po faced.

JB: The main obstacle always had been our commitment and I'll mention some points.

a) Commitment in forming a trusting business partnership with someone who wasn't a childhood friend, a college classmate, and/or a prior work colleague.

b) Commitment in understanding and highlighting each other's strengths and honestly admitting that you need help where you're weakest.

c) Commitment in forging ahead with

your idea when other, larger software companies believe that the work is too hard to accomplish, especially by two young upstarts.

d) Commitment to understanding that while this entrepreneurial journey is the road less traveled, we can do it and we can do it better than anyone else in our industry.

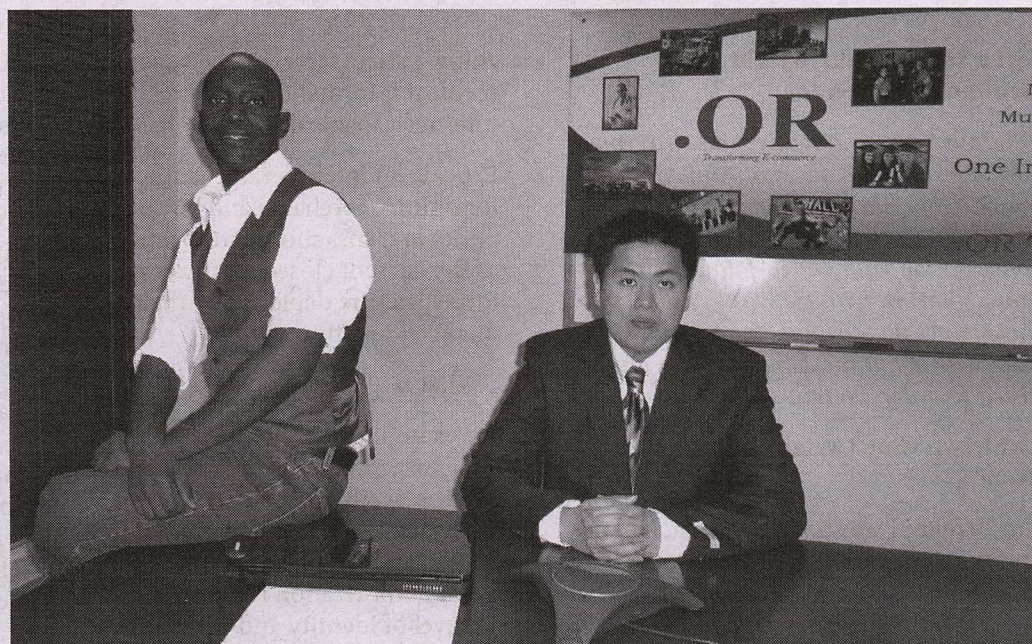
e) Commitment to knowing, regardless of our success or failure, that we have a lot more work and a lot more companies to create.

LSC: When you say, "people like us (Jim and Po), what does this mean to you?"

JB: Entrepreneurs like myself and Po are "Creators". We look at the world and see puzzles, experiments, and ideas just waiting to be solved or be

solved better. We like listening to (not judging) all viewpoints and ideas and incorporating them into our own core beliefs.

LSC: This is a great startup, I believe, and I hope that you two get your projects where you want them to be. Thank you Mr. Brown, and Mr. Lui, for sharing your story with me and the readers of Groundcover News.



OR founders Frank-James (Jim) Brown and Po Lui



"Switching Codes" class session at Spark East in Ypsilanti prepares participants for high demand computer programming jobs



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